Consulting young children about barriers and supports to learning:

Jan Georgeson[a], Jill Porter[b], Harry Daniels[b] and Anthony Feiler[c]

[a]Faculty of Health, Education and Society, University of Plymouth, UK; [b] Department of Education, University of Bath, UK; [c] Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, UK

Corresponding author: Jan Georgeson, Faculty of Health, Education and Society, Rolle Building, Plymouth University, Plymouth, Devon, UK. PL4 8AA.
janet.georgeson@plymouth.ac.uk

Consulting young children about barriers and supports to learning and participation

Abstract: From consideration of children's rights in general and equal opportunities for disabled children in particular, it is important to consult children about barriers and supports to learning and participation. Finding appropriate and feasible ways, however, to incorporate this into educational programmes for younger children can present challenges. Here we report on what happened when teachers from reception classes in England for children aged 4-5 years implemented activities designed to access pupils' views about what helps or hinders at school. Teachers evaluated the feasibility and usefulness of the activities and, together with a small sample of children's responses, this showed that young children could indeed identify aspects of school life they like or dislike, laying the foundations for identifying barriers and supports to learning. Teachers' responses highlighted the importance of careful choice of activity to meet the needs of young children, particularly those with communication difficulties and/or low self-confidence, with staff in some cases adapting and merging activities to suit pupils' needs. Sensitive issues emerged concerning the introduction of consultation activities early in children's school careers. The implications of a compliant rather than collaborative approach by teachers are discussed in the context of children's right to have their views heard, and their developing understanding of difference.

RÉSUMÉ. Issu d'une considération des droits de l'enfant en général et en particulier, l'égalité des chances pour les enfants handicapés, il est important de consulter les enfants sur les barrières et les soutiens à l'apprentissage et la participation. Toutefois, il est difficile de trouver les méthodes appropriés et réalisables pour l'incorporer dans les programmes d'enseignement pour les enfants plus jeunes. Ici dedans on fait son rapport sur les contestations d'une enquête, dans laquelle les instituteurs du cours préparatoire ont mis en œuvre les activités avec l'objectif de découvrir les avis des élèves sur les aides et les obstacles à l'école. Les instituteurs ont évalué la faisabilité et l'utilité des activités, et avec un petit échantillon des réponses des élèves, cela a montré que les enfants jeunes pouvaient identifier les aspects de la vie scolaire qu'ils aimaient ou qu'ils n'aimaient pas, jetant les fondements de l'identification des barrières et des soutiens à l'apprentissage. Les réponses des instituteurs soulignent l'importance d'un choix judicieux d'une activité pour satisfaire les besoins des

élèves, surtout ceux qui ont les difficultés communicatives et/ou qui manque de confiance en soi. En certains cas, le personnel enseignant a adapté et fusionné les activités pour satisfaire les besoins des élèves. Les problèmes délicats se sont dégagés à propos de l'introduction des activités consultatives au début de leur éducation. Les implications d'un approche par les instituteurs d'un caractère conciliant, plutôt que collaborative, ont été examiné avec une considération du droit de l'enfant de faire entendre sa voix, et sa compréhension croissante de la différence.

ABSTRACT: Im Rahmen der Berücksichtigung von Kinderrechten im Allgemeinen und der Chancengleichheit von behinderten Kindern im Besonderen ist es wichtig, die Meinung von Kindern zu Lern- und Integrations-Hemmnissen und -Hilfen anzuhören. Die Suche nach geeigneten und gangbaren Wegen zur Einbeziehung dieser Meinungen in Lehrprogramme für Vorschulkinder kann sich jedoch schwierig gestalten. Hier berichten wir über Erfahrungen von Lehrern von 4-5-jährigenVorschulkindern bei der Einführung von Maßnahmen und Aktivitäten zur Ermittlung der Meinung von Kindern bezüglich von Dingen, die sie als lernfördernd bzw. lernhemmend erachten. Die Lehrer bewerteten die Durchführbarkeit und Nützlichkeit der jeweiligen Maßnahmen und Aktivitäten, und zusammen mit einer kleinen Auswahl an Antworten der Kinder wurde dabei erkannt, dass Vorschulkinder tatsächlich bereits Aspekte schulischen Lebens benennen können, die ihnen gefallen bzw. missfallen, woraus Schlüsse über lernfördernde und lernhemmende Faktoren abgeleitet werden können. Aus den Antworten der Lehrer ging die Bedeutung einer sorgfältigen Auswahl der Maßnahmen entsprechend den Bedürfnissen von Vorschulkindern hervor, speziell jenen mit Kommunikationsschwierigkeiten bzw. gering entwickeltem Selbstvertrauen. Dabei müssen Lehrer in manchen Fällen ggf. Aktivitäten umstellen bzw. verbinden, um den jeweiligen Schülerbedürfnissen gerecht zu werden. Es tauchten sensible Fragen mit Blick auf zu einem frühen Zeitpunkt während der Schulzeit durchgeführte Befragungen/Anhörungen der Kinder auf, und die diesbezüglichen Implikationen werden im Zusammenhang mit dem Recht von Kindern auf Anhörung ihrer Meinungen und mit der Entwicklung ihres Verständnisses von Unterschieden diskutiert.

RESUMEN: Partiendo de la consideración de los derechos de los niños en general, y de la igualdad de oportunidades para los niños discapacitados en particular, es importante consultar a los niños acerca de las barreras y los apoyos

al aprendizaje y a la participación. Sin embargo, encontrar formas adecuadas y viables de incorporar esto en los programas educativos de los niños más pequeños puede presentar dificultades. Aquí informamos de lo que sucedió cuando profesores de clases de primer año de Inglaterra para niños de entre 4 y 5 años pusieron en marcha actividades orientadas a conocer la opinión de los alumnos sobre lo que les ayuda u obstaculiza en la escuela. Los profesores evaluaron la viabilidad y utilidad de las actividades y, junto a una pequeña muestra de las respuestas de los niños, se demostró que los niños más pequeños pueden ciertamente identificar aspectos de la vida escolar que les agradan o desagradan, sentando así las bases para la identificación de las barreras y los apoyos al aprendizaje. Las respuestas de los profesores subrayaron la importancia de una cuidadosa selección de actividades para dar respuesta a las necesidades de los niños más pequeños, en especial aquellos con dificultades de pronunciación o baja confianza en sí mismos, y de que el personal, en algunos casos, adapte y fusione actividades para atender las necesidades de los alumnos. Salieron a la luz cuestiones delicadas al respecto de la introducción de actividades de consulta en una etapa tan temprana de la escolarización de los niños, abordándose sus implicaciones dentro del contexto del derecho de los niños a que sus opiniones sean escuchadas y del desarrollo de su sentido de la diferencia.

Keywords: pupil voice, disability, children's rights, support for learning, self-advocacy

Introduction

Children's right to be heard

Among the 40 substantive rights in United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the right for children to have their views respected (Article 12) and to freedom of expression (Article 13: United Nations, 1989). Furthermore, education should help to ensure that children are aware of their rights and able to exercise them (Article 29). These articles, along with the rest of the Convention, apply equally to disabled and non-disabled children; countries that have ratified the UNCRC must

"respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of […] disability […]" (Article 2). The UNCRC has gradually been subsumed into policy and legislation in signatory countries, leading to increased emphasis on seeking children's views about decisions that will affect them (Bragg, 2010:11). Techniques for consulting children have evolved, including approaches designed to find out from young children what they think of their environment (Clark and Moss, 2012), to involve children in research (Kellett, 2010) and to support vulnerable children to comment on services and support (Aubery and Dahl, 2006).

Interpreting and implementing the Convention has not, however, proved straightforward in practice; Article 12, although often quoted in support of "pupil voice", has not necessarily been fully implemented (for example in UK schools; Lundy, 2007:928) and can be difficult to interpret (for example in Norwegian preschools; Bae, 2010). Consideration of children's rights is part of the more widespread civil rights agenda that gave rise to the disability rights movement and eventually to legislation to remove discrimination on the grounds of disability (Shakespeare, 2006:11-31). Reference in Article 12 of the Convention to "the child who is capable of forming his or her own views", however, suggests limits that might exclude some children, particularly very young children or disabled children with communication difficulties, contradicting the inclusivity of Article 2 and potentially discriminating against these groups. Recent research has agued, however, that as even babies born prematurely are able through body language to communicate views, young children with limited language should not be excluded from decisions that involve them (Anderson et al., 2005; Bae, 2010).

Equal treatment of pupils with disability has therefore become not only a moral but also a legal obligation (Lundy, 2005:939). Education has gradually been included in UK

legislation to protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all (Disability Discrimination Act 1995, 2005; SENDA 2001; Equality Act, 2010). Since December 2006, there has been a legal duty on all UK public sector organisations to adopt a more holistic and proactive approach to promoting disability equality. This includes consulting disabled people and involving them in planning. These duties extend to schools and therefore to consulting with disabled pupils. The Disability Data in Schools project, which gave rise to the data reported in this paper, was designed to support schools in England to promote equality of opportunity for all children, in line with these legislative requirements (Porter et al., 2008; 2010). This included finding ways to help schools incorporate consultation with disabled children into their programmes.

Model of disability

The project adopted an interactional perspective, informed by the work of Shakespeare who argues that we should move beyond disputes between the medical model of disability, which emphasises the individual's deficits and ways to manage these, and the social model, which postulates that it is the way that society is constructed which disables certain individuals. An interactional approach recognizes that both aspects should be considered; as well as seeking to remove barriers which exist in society and which limit participation for individuals with impairments and health conditions, the contribution of these physiological and psychological impairments to the experience of disabled children and adults should not be ignored (Shakespeare, 2006:55-67).

Being different/feeling the same

An interactional approach entails both being clear about the physical reality of children's impairments and health conditions, and about aspects of the environment that

might prevent them from joining in. Aiming for 'equal treatment' by responding to difficulties arising from children's impairments can however lead to tensions and dilemmas (Norwich, 2008). In school contexts it can sometimes mean treating all pupils the same (for example, making sure everyone, including pupils with behaviour difficulties, gets a part in the school play), and sometimes it means treating pupils differently (for example, making sure a child with a hearing impairment always sits at the front to facilitate lip-reading). Individuals with impairments might sometimes prefer being treated differently so that they can access the same activities as everyone else, and at other times might prefer to be treated the same, because this avoids drawing attention to their impairment. Rather than teachers deciding which option to take, children have the right to be consulted about proposed adjustments to curriculum and environment aimed at offering equality of opportunity (Lundy, 2005: 928).

Developing Self Advocacy

It is therefore important that children become accustomed to being consulted about their own needs, so that they can communicate what their needs are, how and when these might be met, and the strategies and supports that can help them to overcome difficulties. These are skills that are useful for all children but are particularly important for children with impairments and health conditions. Children need to be able to recognise when there is something about a particular context that is making things difficult for them, and then to be able to ask for changes that will improve the situation for them. The earlier that children start to develop these important skills in self-advocacy, the more confident they will be later in their school careers (Kleinert et al., 2010). Recent evidence shows that young children, both with and without disabilities, are indeed able to participate in activities exploring what they do and do not like about school (Gray and Winter 2011); to become effective self-advocates, children also need

to be able think about why they don't like some things about school and what might make them better.

Learning about difference

Our sense of self develops through being with others in social contexts and is shaped by the attitudes and behaviours of those around us both towards ourselves and towards other people; when children embark on their school careers, they start to learn about the socially and culturally defined 'positions' (Holland et al., 1998:32) which are on offer to pupils in the education system (such as ''loud student'' or ''bad student'' or ''successful student'' or ''smart student'; Urrieta, 2007:9). Through observing attitudes and behaviours towards others who are in some way different, children learn about what is valued in the context of education in particular and in society in general (Kelly, 2010). As children move into preschool and primary school provision, not only do their responses to people who are different change and develop in line with cultural influences (Sigelman, Miller and Whitworth, 1986), but children also develop an understanding that some differences can make it easier to get on, while others sometimes make things harder (Tamm and Prellwitz, 2001: Diamond, Hong and Tu, 2008). If children are to develop into tolerant and supportive individuals in a society committed to reducing barriers to participation for all its citizens, it is therefore important that all children learn about other people's needs and ways of meeting those needs. This contributes to the development of children's attitudes towards disability (Skär, 2010:184).

Methods

The Disability Data in Schools Project

The Disability Data in Schools project was funded by the government in two phases between 2007 and 2010 and sought to help schools in gathering two types of information to help to include children with disabilities in schools and early years settings: information about children's impairments and difficulties and information about the barriers to and supports for their participation. A questionnaire for parents asked about their children's difficulties and how these impacted on everyday activities The second element of the project, from which the data reported here are drawn, aimed to help schools to collect information from children about barriers to and supports for learning and participation. The project as a whole involved children from 4 years to 13 years; here we report only on what happened in reception classes with children aged 4-5 years.

Developing activities to access children's views

We sought to develop activities that would both help teachers to find out about their pupils' needs, and introduce all young children to thinking and talking about barriers and supports that affect participation in school. We decided that the activities should be suitable for whole class involvement, to avoid singling out disabled children as different, to encourage all children to think about what makes life at school good or not so good, and to develop skills in self-advocacy. The project builds on earlier work looking into the experiences of disabled children (Lewis et al., 2005), ways of accessing pupil voice for children with communication difficulties (Lewis and Porter, 2004; 2007) and training resources developed by the UK government to support the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act in schools and early years settings (DfES; 2005).

We were also guided by three principles for proactive planning for disabled children in Early Years:

- Improvements to the physical environment to increase access ? to everything happening in the setting
- Increased access to the curriculum
- Improvements in the range of ways in which communication with disabled children is promoted. (Accessibility Planning Projects: Early Years (APPEY); DfES, 2005).

We developed six activities in consultation with staff in mainstream and special schools. The rationale behind these activities was first to ask children to identify things they liked and things they didn't like, and then if possible to encourage children to think about what was good about what they liked and what was bad about things they didn't like. Finally, we asked children what might help to improve something bad, moving from categorising to describing then to explaining.

Two activities were specifically designed for use with reception class children and children with communication difficulties. Each was based on existing materials that had already been found to be successful in supporting with children in the early stages of communication. ***Talking Mats*** adopted a visual approach while an ***Interview Schedule*** took a verbal approach. ***Talking Mats*** was based on the approach adopted by Cameron & Murphy (2002: see also http://www.talkingmats.com) and used a simple symbol array to record the things that make school difficult and the things that help in school by placing pictures of activities, people and places alongside a symbol (usually a smiley, sad or unsure face) that best represented children's feelings. We also developed an

Interview Schedule based on a questionnaire informed by the Effective Early Learning Project (1995) and which was being used successfully with preschool children with disabilities at Cirencester Opportunity Group. This explored children's favourite things about school as well as those aspects they didn't like, and asked what would make these activities easier. The full schedule is available on the project website (http://www.bath.ac.uk/research/pdes/seeking%20pupil%20views.pdf.) but questions included:

> What do you think you are really good at doing?
>
> What do you find hard to do? / What do you find a bit tricky?
>
> Can you think of anything that would help you with this?

with suggestions to customise the questions to match the child's particular situation and to prompt for supports as well as barriers.

As well as the two activities we recommended for use with reception class pupils, there were four other activities in each school's project pack, which had been prepared for use with older/more linguistically confident pupils and for pupils who communicated with symbols. We will describe these briefly here because some reception class teachers chose one of these four activities instead of the two activities we had designed for reception-aged children. Full details of all activities are available from the project website (www.bath.ac.uk/research/pdes).

Point to Point is a paper-and-pencil approach based on counselling techniques, which focused on children's recall of specific events, both good and bad; ***Online Child Questionnaire*** is an online survey inviting pupils to rate their experiences in school, using a 6 point smiley-to-sad face rating scale and ***Nominal Group Technique,*** a structured focus group method to generate and then rank ideas about what helps/hinders at school. In response to comments from teachers in the development phase, the project

also included a short ***Symbol Questionnaire*** devised for pupils who communicated using Wigdit symbols. This consisted of 11 closed questions exploring good and bad things about school.

Choice and conduct of activity

Staff representatives from the project schools were invited to briefing meetings where all six activities were explained. Guidance materials for each activity were also provided based on feedback from staff during the development phase. These included guidance on the role of the facilitator, as well as approximate preparation time, the appropriateness of each activity for particular age groups and for different levels of linguistic competence. Individual schools were encouraged to select which activities to use in their own contexts, based on project guidance and their knowledge of the children in their settings.

Ethical considerations

Parents were informed via individual letters about the purpose of the study and the use of data for research purposes, and staff explained the contents of the letter to any parents who might have literacy difficulties. All activities were carried out by school staff and issues of informed consent were therefore discussed with the schools during briefing meetings, emphasizing the importance of inviting children to take part in the activities and not just assuming their participation, explaining to them why they had been invited to take part, being sensitive to children looking uncomfortable who might not wish to continue, and making it clear that children did not have to answer questions or make responses if they did not want to. Project guidance emphasized the importance of confidentiality, of setting a relaxed atmosphere where children could respond (or not

respond) freely and the role of the facilitator to explain the purpose of the activity to the child and its connection with the research project, as demonstrated in the extract from the guidance in Figure 1:

Insert Figure 1 about here

Data collection

Seventeen schools from 10 Local Authorities across England tried out at least one activity with children in reception classes (aged 4-5 years). For the most part, these children were in their first term of school attendance. Children were invited to take part in activities individually, in small groups or as part of a whole class activity. Teachers' evaluations from the following three sources form the body of the dataset:

- Each school was asked to send back an evaluation form outlining how the activities had been carried out, how useful the activities had been (see Table 1) and what had been learned.

- In addition, we visited a sample of schools to talk to staff about using the activities and ways in which they had adapted the activities to suit their particular situation.

- In three schools staff also shared with us their records of children's responses.

Analysing teachers' evaluations of the activities

Our analysis is based on careful scrutiny of these sources of information for evidence that the activities provided children with opportunities to raise issues about environment, curriculum and interactions with other people, in line with the three APPEY principles summarised above (improvements to the physical environment and

increased access to the full range of activities in the setting; increased access to the curriculum; and improvements in communication strategies).

Did teachers find activities useful?

Although only two of these activities had been designed for use in reception classes, we were surprised to discover from evaluation forms that in the event five out of the six activities were used with reception class children from one or more mainstream schools in the project, as shown in Table 1. However, as is also evident from Table 1, the two activities specifically designed for use with the reception class age group were, not surprisingly, judged to be the most useful.

Insert Table 1 here

Interview Schedule

Although all five schools that used the interview schedule rated it as very useful, teachers' evaluations highlighted some limitations. Teachers commented that

> 'Children sometimes said what we wanted to hear not what they thought',
> 'Quieter children have less input and less evidence can be collected',
> 'Reception [children] did not always understand what was being asked'
> 'Reception [children] need more support to encourage conversation'

However, when invited to describe prompts and supports used during the activity, it became clear that teachers had anticipated some of these problems or adapted the activity as they went along. The interview schedule was therefore in many cases just the starting point for devising activities which teachers considered would work best to elicit the views of their pupils. In some cases, this activity (or variations on it) not only produced information about children's likes and dislikes, but also offered opportunities

for children to think about solutions, and therefore to start to think about what is needed in school to make it work for everyone:

> 'The children are used to being asked for opinions and reasons. [We now want to] move to asking for solutions to problems e.g. through school council'
> 'Children support each other by sharing different views, giving solutions'

Talking Mats

Teachers reported that the combination of symbols and pictures not only helped those who had very little language to communicate, but also provided a starting point for children who were more confident speakers. However, one teacher also commented that responses from children from this age group might be influenced by their willingness to please, and this became more of an issue for children with communication difficulties who struggled to understand instructions. This fits in with project researchers' observations during development of the activities: children who were unsure whether they had understood the task tended to look up at staff to see if their choices were the 'right' answer, and it proved difficult to convince them that they were being asked for their own opinions. Staff from special schools suggested that children could be first introduced to the ***Talking Mats*** activities by classifying favoured and unfavoured foods, because children found it easy to express their own preferences on this topic. Then, once they had learned how the activity worked, children could be asked about photographs of school life to find out about what they liked and what they didn't like.

Teachers reported that children's responses to ***Talking Mats*** activities did indeed help them to find out about times of day and locations which children did not like (e.g. the canteen; and toilets) and why children didn't like them. While some of these findings were not surprising, some of the reasons why children didn't like places suggested clear modifications that could make the experience of school better for all

children, about which staff would otherwise have been unaware; for example, modifying toilet doors so they didn't 'bang and make the cloakrooms noisy and scary'.

How did teachers use these activities in context?

When teachers' evaluations were analysed, not only had some teachers modified activities to suit their own context, it was also apparent that teachers had combined elements from different activities. The original interview schedule is now being used by one school to produce its own very effective symbol questionnaire (Porter et al., 2010:35). We present three examples below where we had access to children's responses to illustrate how teachers incorporated the activities into their planning, and to indicate the kinds of comments children made.

Example 1: 'Reading' Talking Mats

The Talking Mats activity could reveal subtle distinctions about children's confidence in different areas. In Figure 2, the Talking Mat array on the left shows a 4 year old boy's Talking Mat which reflected consistent preferences for literacy activities (writing, reading and phonics) and social times (playtime and dinner time) while the array on the right, from a girl in the same class, shows a less consistent pattern of liking play time but not dinner time, and liking writing but not reading and phonics. Although cautious about possible misinterpretation of the symbols (did the child on the left like art activities, and had interpreted the writing symbol as drawing?), the teacher investigated further; perhaps the child's enthusiasm for graphic work could support their work in reading and phonics? She used the results to inform her planning, and included a whole class discussion based on a summary bar chart as well as individual conversations about the children's views of particular subjects.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Example 2 – Talking Mats for everyone

In another primary school in the South of England, three reception class teachers got together to make their own version of ***Talking Mats***, using photographs of five different environments, five curriculum activities and four groups of staff (covering the three APPEY aspects of inclusive planning). Seventy-six children chose to give their opinions about these different aspects of school and worked one-to-one with their teacher or teaching assistant, who used smiley and sad faces symbols to find out what they liked or disliked and prompted what was good/bad and why. Each consultation lasted about 5 minutes and children's responses were recorded on three A4 class response sheets, one for each aspect, which had been devised by the teachers. This resulted in a rich but manageable set of responses where it was easy to track individuals' preferences as well as overall issues.

Insert Table 2 about here

As can be seen from Table 2, most children liked most aspects of school life, with 79% liking all or nearly all aspects of environment and people, and 90% liking all or nearly all activities. Children were also asked <u>why</u> they liked/disliked aspects of school life and this helped to identify barriers and supports. Over half of them were able to do this for environment and activities, but found commenting on why they liked or disliked people much harder.

The activity succeeded in revealing children's growing awareness of feeling different or finding things difficult. For example, 9 children didn't like PE (Physical Education). In some cases this was associated with getting changed:

"some people stare at me"

and in others because they found it physically difficult :

"it makes my legs hurt"

However, it was apparent from teachers' comments and from the summary response sheets that some children, particularly those for whom English was an additional language, had not understood the activity and would need a more customised approach, with an individual Talking Mat specifically designed for them.

Example 3 – Interviewing with Photographs

A third primary school in the North of England combined general questions about coming to school with questions prompted by photographs of places, activities and people. Fourteen children chose to take part and their response sheets from this activity showed what they liked and sometimes about why they liked it. For example, all 14 children liked being a monitor, either because they enjoyed doing the activity:

'You get to do different things'

'I like doing jobs '

'I like walking down the corridor'

or because they liked the way it made them feel:

'I like the blue sticker and being good'

'When I take the register Mrs [C…] always says "you're very smart"'.

This showed that some children were learning about roles and actions that are valued in the school context, and what it feels like to take on such roles and responsibilities. Reception class children could also make distinctions between what happens in a particular place and talk about what they didn't like there and the rules that limited what they could do:

'I don't like the hall when we have assembly because we do nothing but sit'

'I don't like the hall when we have assembles but I like it for PE'

'We can't play in the corridor'

Places could be associated with things that make them feel good, or not so good

'The hall where we watch TV and we do PE and get merits'

'I don't like assembly because they don't choose me and I really want it to be me'.

The activity had enabled the child making this last comment to articulate his awareness of a valued role he wanted to assume but did not meet the requirements.

All children could identify people (teachers and classmates) who were sources of support, as well as (in 3 cases) being the reason why they didn't like a particular time or place:

'sometimes [I don't like] outside when people punch and fight with me and want to have a war with me'.

'[I don't like] sitting next to people who disturb me. J. disturbs me and annoys me'

There was also evidence (in 3 cases) that children were developing awareness that some children were good at particular subjects, and how being good at something led to different places and actions:

[In response to photograph of bookshelves] 'That's where I get my books because I'm good at reading'

'Laura helps me because she is very good at reading'.

'I like reading and looking at books but I don't get to choose them yet'.

Against the backdrop of simple stories about what children liked, there was some evidence therefore that children were also developing an understanding of difference, and that some children were already succeeding in the classroom environment, while others were not quite there.

Other activities

Our guidance (both in the form of notes and comments at the briefing) had made it clear that both the ***online questionnaire*** and the ***structured focus group*** had been designed with secondary school pupils in mind, and the ***symbol questionnaire*** was designed specially for use with children already using Widgit symbols. We were surprised, therefore, to find that reception class teachers had decided to use them, sometimes

successfully (with considerable effort), sometimes with disappointing results:

> 'The wording of the questions was difficult for reception age children'
> 'All struggled to engage with this activity - it was merely a 'paper exercise' which had produced absolutely nothing that is useful to us'.

The appeal of the questionnaires was apparent at the briefing meetings; teachers could see how they worked, they looked colourful and attractive and were ready to use. It was clear, however, from schools that used the questionnaires with reception-aged children that it had been hard work.

Discussion

Children's responses and teachers' evaluations showed that the different activities could indeed provide opportunities for children to identify aspects of school which they liked and didn't like, and begin to develop skills in self-advocacy. While for the most part children's likes and dislikes were largely what teachers expected (liking 'choosing time'; disliking smelly toilets), they were surprised by some responses, such as 'how many reception class children found making friends difficult', and this prompted them to plan more activities for joint working as well as stories and discussions about making friends. As a result of trying out the activities, reception class teachers were prompted into thinking of new ways of including consultation with pupils in their regular programme. However, two issues emerged which merit further consideration.

The first issue concerns talking about other people as barriers to learning. Most schools opted not to include people in the set of photographs for children to give their views, anticipating difficulties arising from children making negative comments about classmates or colleagues. The issue of talking about people (staff or children) as barriers or supports to learning arose in the development phase and during briefings and it

quickly emerged that many staff felt uncomfortable about this. Some staff in special schools, however, commented on the importance for pupils with limited communication of having some way of showing if they were being cared for or working with someone they disliked; this is clearly a 'matter affecting the child' and according to Article 12 all children should have the right to express a view on this. Examples 2 and 3 above did include photographs showing staff members; children mainly pointed out staff they liked but some also commented on staff they didn't like. In the context of one-to-one interviews the schools accepted this as valuable information, but highlighted the importance of thinking carefully about how information from children's responses will be used, and who will be able to access it.

None of the staff felt comfortable offering up photos of classmates for children to rate as like/dislike. Relationships with peers is, however, clearly an aspect of school life which is important for all children, and for disabled children in particular, given the evidence that more than eight in ten disabled pupils have been bullied at school (Tippett et al., 2011:26). Questions from the Interview Schedule which asked about 'the way people talk' or 'what people say' enabled children to comment on aspects of the behaviour of other people without asking about whether they liked them or not, and this would appear to be a more appropriate approach, at least for those children who can understand these questions. Further work is needed, however, to identify ways that will help children with more communication difficulties to raise issues about other pupils as barriers to learning, and which teachers feel comfortable using in a classroom context.

The second issue is the spirit in which the activities are conducted and how this reinforces messages about the school's attitude to pupil voice (Lundy, 2005:938) and to difference and disability (Grenier, 2010). The examples above where schools adapted and combined activities showed the potential of the activities when teachers collaborate

and work hard to produce activities which matched their children's needs, and which they enjoyed. Other teachers, under pressure from competing demands on their time, were attracted to the activities that required the least preparation, such as the two questionnaires. While this is understandable, it meant that sometimes children and teachers found themselves struggling through activities that were not enjoyable and were not providing much information about barriers and supports. Furthermore, feedback from teachers quoted above showed that they knew that the activity in which they were engaged was not appropriate for the children in their class. These accounts suggest schools were sometimes trying to make the child fit the activity, rather than find an activity to fit the child.

Making equality of opportunity for disabled pupils an enforceable right instead of an answerable need brings yet another aspect of teaching under the regulatory gaze, which can lead to performative compliance rather than genuine inclusion, thereby shifting the emphasis from consulting disabled children because teachers want to, towards consulting them because they have to. An activity that is carried out as a "paper exercise" passes on messages about what is valued (or rather what is not valued): routine compliance, instead of purposeful collaboration in carrying out these activities, has implications for children's developing understanding about difference and society's response to difference. This is a complex process, shaped by implicit messages passed on in everyday interactions at home and in other social contexts, like schools. There is growing evidence from research which shows how children's understanding of disability is mediated by the attitudes of those around them, either in their peer group (Tamm and Prellwitz, 2001) or through parents, practitioners and other adults in society (Diamond and Kensinger, 2002; Kelly, 2005). It could therefore be argued that not only were teachers learning from children's responses to the activities reported here; children

would also learn from the way activities were presented, from teachers' reactions to what they heard and, perhaps more tellingly, from whether any changes took place as a result.

Conclusion

To summarise what we have found, we will use Lundy's model conceptualising Article 12 and pupil voice, which sets out the importance of attending to Space, Voice, Audience and Influence (Lundy, 2005:932). From teachers' evaluations we learnt that the two activities designed for reception classes could provide a safe space to express a view and appropriate ways for all children to find a voice and communicate what they liked/disliked about school and why. The children's comments support the conclusion young children can be encouraged to develop self-advocacy skills to remove barriers and request support for learning. However, when there was a poor match between child and activity, and little attempt to amend the activity to fit the child, the experience was unsatisfactory for both teacher and pupils. Lundy warns that compliance with the outward signs of consultation can be counterproductive, and draws attention to the need for more training to help schools understand what accessing pupil voice really means (Lundy, 2005:938-939). Examples of good practice reported here show the benefits that accrue with attending to all four facets; if schools develop opportunities (spaces) for children to be consulted (giving voice), they must also give an audience to children's views by listening to what they say and then acting on this to demonstrate that children's views can influence provision.

References

Alderson, P., Hawthorne, J. and Killen, M. (2005) The Participation Rights of Premature Babies, *International Journal Of Children's Rights,* 13, 31-50

Aubery, C., & Dahl, S. (2006). Children's voices: The views of vulnerable children on their service providers and the relevance of services they receive, British Journal of Social Work, 23, 21–39.

Bae, B. (2010) Realizing children's right to participation in early childhood settings: some critical issues in a Norwegian context. *Early Years* 30: (3) 205–218

Bragg, S. (2010) Consulting Young People: A literature review. 2nd ed. Newcastle: Creativity, Culture and Education.

Cameron, L. and Murphy, J. 2002. Enabling young people with a learning disability to make choices at a time of transition. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 30:105-11.

Clark, A and Moss, P. (2011) Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach (2nd edition). London: National Children's Bureau

Diamond, K. E., Hong, S-Y., & Tu, H. 2008. Context influences preschool children's decisions to include a peer with a physical disability in play. *Exceptionality* 16: 141-155.

Diamond, K.E. and Kensinger, K.R. 2002. Vignettes from Sesame Street: Preschooler's Ideas about Children with Down Syndrome and Physical Disability. *Early Education & Development* 13, no. 4: October 2002

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2005a *Implementing the DDA in schools and early years settings* DfES Publications Nottingham ref 0160-2006DOC-EN www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications

DfES 2005b *Accessibility Planning Project: Early Years (APPEY)*. DfES: http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/earlyyears/sendisability/accessibilityplanningproject/appearlyyears/

Gray, C. and Winter, E. (2011) Hearing voices: participatory research with preschool children with and without disabilities. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 19 3 309-320

Grenier, M. (2010) Moving to inclusion: a socio-cultural analysis of practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 14(4) 387-400

Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D. and Cain, C. (1998) *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Kellett, M. (2010) *Rethinking Children and Research; Attitudes in Cotemporary Society* London: Continuum.

Kelly, B. (2005) 'Chocolate...makes you autism': Impairment, disability and childhood identities. *Disability & Society* 20, no. 3: 261-275.

Kleinert, J. O., Harrison, E. M, Fisher, T. L, and Kleinert, H. L. (2010). "I Can" and "I Did"-Self-Advocacy for Young Students With Developmental Disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children* 43, no. 2 pp 16-25

Lewis, A., Christopher Robertson, and Sarah Parsons 2005. *Experiences of disabled students and their families: Phase 1.* Research report to Disability Rights Commission, June 2005. http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/DRC/library/research/education/experiences_of_disabled.html

Lewis A., & Porter J. 2004. Interviewing Children and Young People with Learning Disabilities: Guidelines for Researchers and Multi-Professional Practice. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 32, no. 4: 191-197

Lewis, A. and Porter, J. 2007. Research and Pupil Voice. In *Handbook of Special Education*, ed. L. Florian. London: Sage.

Lundy, L., (2007) 33(6) 'Voice is not enough': Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Education Research Journal*, 927-942

Norwich, B. 2008. *Dilemmas of Difference, Inclusion and Disability*. Abingdon: Routledge

Pascal, C., Bertram, A. D., Ramsden, F., Georgeson, J., Saunders, M., & Mould, C. (1995). Evaluating and Developing Quality in Early Childhood Settings: a professional development programme. Worcester: Amber.

Porter, J., Daniels, H., Georgeson, J., Feiler, A., Hacker, J., Tarleton, B., Gallop, V. and Watson, D., 2008. *Disability Data Collection for Children's Services.* Research Report. Department for Children, Schools and Families, (DCSF-RR062/DCSF-RB062).

Porter, J., Daniels, H., Martin, S., Hacker, J., Feiler, A. and Georgeson, J., 2010. *Testing of Disability Identification Tool for Schools.* Research Report. Department for Children, Schools and Families, (DFE-RR025).

Sigelman, C. K., Miller, T. E., & Whitworth, L. A. 1986. The early development of stigmatizing reactions to physical differences. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 7,: 17–32.

Skär, L. 2010 Children's conception of the word 'disabled': a phemonenographic study. *Disability and Society* 25, no. 2: 177-189

Shakespeare, T. 2006 *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. London: Routledge

Tamm, M. and Prellwitz, M. 2001. 'If I had a friend in a wheelchair': children's thoughts on disabilities. *Child: Care, Health and Development* 27, no. 3: 223-240

Tippett, Neil, Catherine Houlston and Peter K. Smith. 2011 *Prevention and response to identity-based bullying among local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales*; *Research Report 64.* Equality and Human Rights Commission: www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/64_**identity**_based_bullying.pdf

Urrieta, L. (2007) Figured Worlds and Education: An Introduction to the Special Issue.*The Urban Review* 39, (2) 1-7

Table 1. Schools and children taking part in activities, and ratings of usefulness.

Activity	Number of schools using activity with reception class	Total number of children taking part in activity	Usefulness (number of schools giving rating)
Interview schedule	5	126	5: Very useful
Talking Mats	6	238	4: Quite useful 2: Very Useful
Focus group	2	70	1: Quite useful 1: Very useful
Symbol Questionnaire	2	18	1: Quite useful 1: Very useful
Online Questionnaire	2	37	1: not at all useful 1: quite useful
Point to point	0	0	Not used

Table 2: Children's response to photographs in Talking Mats activity

Number of photos liked	5	4	3	2	1	0	Total of Children responding	Number of children commenting
Environment	38	22	11	4	1	0	76	34
Activities	47	23	3	3	1	0	77	39
People		56	4	13	3	0	76	4

Figure 1. Extract from Guidance Materials

<u>Explaining the activity to pupils</u>

Make sure the pupils know who will be reading the responses, whether their names will be included and why people want to know about what they think.

Explain that you are going to write down the pupils' answers so that you can remember what they said.

Emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers; you just want to

<u>Explaini</u>

Figure 2. Examples of Talking Mats from two reception class children.